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Climate change may crush the U.S. economy, but fixing it could be the boost we need

By Rose Marcario



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After years of neglect by media, business, and politicians, the climate crisis is finally getting the headlines it deserves. Reports by the global scientific community have painted an increasingly dire picture of this crisis's impact on people around the globe. America's youth — the generation on whose shoulders the gravest impacts of climate change will likely fall without immediate action — have taken to the courts, the streets, and the halls of Congress. And businesses around the globe have been taking action through voluntary reductions in emissions and commitments to clean energy investment. All the attention should be cause for large-scale action, but our government's response continues to be anemic at best.

Policymakers have yet to grasp the frightening magnitude of this threat. Climate change is undeniably global and has rightfully been described as an environmental crisis — which, standing on its own, should be a sufficient clarion call to immediate and focused action. It is also a national security

threat, a looming food and water crisis, a social justice issue, and the biggest economic crisis our country has ever faced.

Fortunately, there are solutions — and with them a potential economic opportunity for America's middle class. An emerging clean energy economy is poised to pair prosperity with a range of climate solutions and protect our planet for future generations.

To build support for solutions, we need to acknowledge the proven scope of the problem. For too long, partisan politics have sidelined responsible policies to slow or reverse the climate crisis, and special interest groups have spread false information, and worse, denied scientific fact.

For starters, let's acknowledge the truth that climate change is a job killer — and it is unlike anything we've ever seen. Climate change puts at risk well over a billion jobs worldwide that rely on a healthy and stable environment in industries like agriculture, fisheries, forestry, tourism and more. Indeed, while politicians of both parties parade around the country claiming to care deeply about putting middle-class Americans back to work, our economy and jobs are all put at risk by our growing carbon footprint. The most recent [Climate Assessment report](#) puts it in stark terms: with the continued growth of greenhouse gas emissions, the U.S. economy is projected to lose hundreds of billions of dollars — more than the current GDP of some U.S. states

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These devastating projections stem from a wide variety of climate impacts, including the sheer uptick in deaths across the country associated with poorer air quality, extreme temperatures and weather events, widespread drought, out-of-control wildfires and more. As our climate becomes increasingly inhospitable, businesses will suffer huge losses and middle-class families will have a much harder time making ends meet. Even our own government, paralyzed by the politicization of climate change, predicts the U.S. economy will shrink by as much as 10 percent by the end of this century if emissions continue at current rates.

We don't need another report to tell us this harsh reality: Our changing climate will hurt lower-income Americans and minority communities the most. This country is already suffering from historic income inequality, and climate change is making it exponentially harder for the American dream to survive. Our children and grandchildren will undoubtedly face significantly less economic opportunity than my generation has enjoyed.

But there's a silver lining to the mess we've created. Climate change's enormous challenges also present enormous economic opportunities — to innovate and to lead with new practices and technologies that can engage and lift our middle class. Already, the growth of renewable wind and solar energy is creating jobs 12 times faster than the rest of the U.S. economy. Millions of new jobs can be ours if we muster the political will to respond with urgency and decisive action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and embrace an exciting new economy built on clean energy.

That's a big *if*. In recent decades, climate change has been relegated to the bottom of the priority list in our electoral politics. Our political leaders have never felt a mandate to enact strong policies that will help us avoid the worst-case scenario, even though devastating impacts of the climate crisis

are being felt by communities coast to coast. Policymakers have failed to embrace the vision required to speed our national transition to renewable energy. Not even the ground we're quickly losing to China in the race to rule the clean energy economy has sparked much interest among our so-called leaders.

That's why we must address the climate crisis not only as an environmental problem, but as an economic *opportunity*. History shows us that strong environmental protections and economic growth go hand in hand, and we must not lose ground in solving the climate crisis with American ingenuity and leadership waiting in the wings. Study after study shows that jobs are among the top issues for American voters, and candidates running for office should embrace the bulletproof argument that strong climate action and clean energy policy will benefit middle-class Americans through sweeping job creation.

We're starting to see hints of this approach in the Green New Deal and other proposals circulating in Washington. And some businesses, including Patagonia, are working hard to pick up the slack left behind by government inaction. But we need federal leadership to put policies in place that will slow and reverse the climate crisis and truly realize the economic opportunity in front of us. Simply put, we need transformative policies that include aggressive clean, renewable energy goals, a more responsible and sustainable system of agriculture, and increased protection for our public lands and waters.

Candidates and elected officials who claim to care about the long-term prosperity of the American people — especially the struggling middle class — should get behind a thriving, competitive future for our country driven by climate action and clean energy. Our planet depends on it.



Rose Marcario is the President and CEO of the California-based outdoor company, Patagonia.

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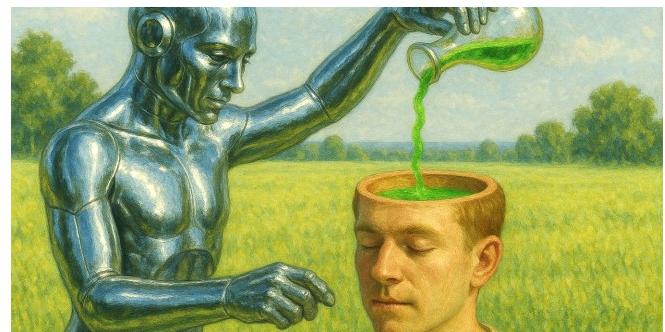
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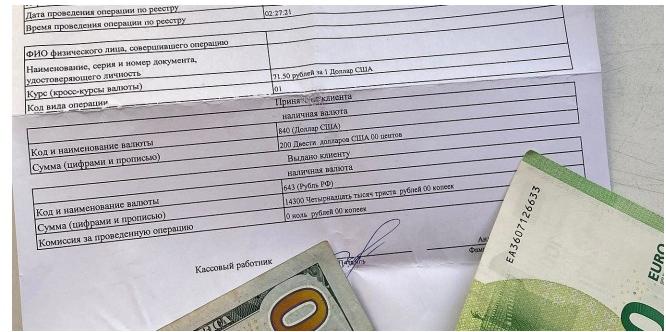
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